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**The Lucky Ones:  
Blacks in East Austin Turning Profit from Gentrification**

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**The Lucky Ones:  
Blacks in East Austin Turning Profit from Gentrification**

**by**

**Lillian Paige Turner, B.A.**

**Report**

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## **Dedication**

*This report is dedicated to all of my brothers and sisters on the East Side. You have not been forgotten.*

## **Acknowledgements**

*To everyone who has helped me on this journey, namely my Lord and Savior  
Jesus Christ, my family and my supervisory committee – thank you.*

## **Abstract**

### **The Lucky Ones: Blacks in East Austin Turning Profit from Gentrification**

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East Austin is no stranger to rapid and ever-present gentrification. In the last several decades, the east side has seen not only a change in infrastructure but has also suffered from a change in cultural diversity, as many of the area's long time minority residents are being systematically pushed out of the neighborhoods they have called home. East Austin's black residents are among the most displaced in the area and many have been victim of financial limitations. However, some black locals have been able to profit from the gentrification on their own terms – selling their homes, renting out their properties or building wealth by holding onto increasingly valuable land. This report features some of the lucky few who have been able to take advantage of the explosive real estate boom amidst the cultural unrest.

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## **The Lucky Ones: Blacks in East Austin Turning Profit from Gentrification**

Local Yvonne King, 51, is in her own words “the last of a dying breed”. King is an East Austin native, and the neighborhood she fondly recalls from her childhood memories is a shell of its former self. Since then, new, unexpected neighbors have moved in. The block’s traffic became noticeably congested. And “for sale,” “for lease” and “coming soon” signs became a common sight.

Her childhood home became more than just her family’s residence. It became a valuable asset that she says happened almost overnight.

King sold her childhood home on Darlington Lane in 2001 for \$125,000. King’s mother, Betty Jo, purchased the home in 1969 for \$12,000. King says her family moved out of the Darlington Lane home in her teenage years and began leasing the property out to church friends. Eventually, Betty Jo decided it was time to sell the property and divvy up the profits to her seven children.

“We put a ‘for sale by owner’ sign out front and it didn’t take long for us to get an offer,” King said. “My mother had started getting ill, so she wanted to sell the home as a way of protecting her children in the future financially.”

King says her family benefitted tremendously from the sale of their home and her mother was able to completely finance a new residence. Today, the King family’s former home is appraised at \$204,610, an 88 percent increase from \$108,611 just five years earlier, according to the Travis Central Appraisal District (TCAD).

Not too far away, East Austin residents Ben and Harvey Franklin have a similar story to tell. They had spent nearly 36 years in their two-story, eggshell-white Poquito Street home on the east side of Austin. But this year is different. The home they lived in



for almost four decades is barren. Boxes lined the front room and the dining room felt almost skeletal without its table. After years of memory making and patiently watching their property value skyrocket, they made the decision to sell.

While on Poquito Street, the couple completed three renovations, raised two grandchildren and invested more than \$100,000 in their property since buying it in 1984 for \$65,000. The Franklins sold their home in April for \$535,000, making a staggering \$470,000 profit.

An East Austin native, Harvey Franklin fell in love with the home the minute they visited the property.

“East Austin really was and still is my home,” she said.

Franklin says that the change in neighborhood demographics was alarmingly ironic: “I was raised here, when there was nothing but black people everywhere in this neighborhood. Whites avoided this entire side of the [I-35] highway. When we saw white people in our neighborhood growing up it was actually a shock.”

The Franklins were among the four (now three) remaining black families on the block. And it’s not just their street that has changed – there is an influx of new businesses, many catering to the new influx of white residents. Within walking distance of their home, the Franklins can visit a popular coffee shop. On nearby Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard there are some new eateries. None of these more upscale neighborhood amenities existed 20 years ago.

It all points to an emerging trend: more and more long time black residents of East Austin are selling their homes for far more money than they paid. East Austin is now a booming real estate market with serious payout opportunities.

According to the Real Estate Council of Austin's (RECA) most recent affordability report, homes valued at more than \$300,000 citywide increased from 10 percent in 2000 to 31 percent as of 2012.

Homes in East Austin are now on the market for anywhere from \$263,000 to \$777,000 according to the Austin Board of Realtors (ABR). Between 2010 and 2013, homes experienced a price increase twice that of the city's prices overall, according to ABR. In the last five years, the area's average property value increased 41 percent, according to TCAD.

And although East Austin has experienced a significant loss of black culture and heritage, the transformation is a source of major financial gain for some of its black residents:

Some families are selling their property for nearly eight times their purchase price. The appraisal value of the Franklin's home has increased 72 percent, from \$85,000 in 2010 to \$146,250 in 2014, according to TCAD.

When the Franklins purchased their two-story, many friends and family members were apprehensive. Harvey Franklin says the main concern with the purchase of their home was the less-than-favorable reputation of the neighborhood. Drugs, prostitution and a neighborhood no one wanted to live in topped the list of reasons to worry for family members.

But now, the couple stands to earn nearly seven figures in profit from the sale.

“It’s just the right time. We have been here 30 years and we bought this as an investment and now it’s time to capitalize on the investment,” Ben Franklin said.

The investment proved to be a smart one. According to a Census data study by Governing.com, which reports on gentrification trends in metropolitan areas, the most recent median home value for the Poquito Street neighborhood is \$228,600, a whopping 96 percent increase from the \$83,600 median home value in 2000.

“We are at an age in life where we want to be able to retire and basically be debt-free and mortgage free,” said Ben Franklin. “We need to make absolutely sure that we get to enjoy the benefits of our investment. We put up with all the problems. And we are able now to sell this property and wherever we buy again, we can ensure our comfort.”

## **East Side Appreciation**

Property values throughout the city are dramatically increasing. Overall, the city’s median home value is \$222,100, a 78 percent increase over the last decade, according to the 2014 Comprehensive Housing Survey.

Homes east of I-35 and between East Cesar Chavez Street and East 12th Street are among the ones showing the highest median home value gains in the city as of 2014, rising between 39.67 and 44 percent, according to the Census.

Streets that just a few decades ago were considered by Austinites to be a part of a no man’s land are now raking in substantial value. East Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard area median home values rose to \$174,600 in 2012, nearly a 40 percent

increase from \$116,800 in 2000. The increased wealth of homeowners and high demand for Austin properties are evident in the value of homes throughout the city.

The increasing property values are tied to gentrification. The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) defines gentrification as the arrival of wealthier [usually white] people in an existing urban [usually black and Latino] district. PBS continues on to attribute several factors to gentrification including reduced crime, new investment in real estate and infrastructure, an increase in property value and property taxes, displacement and changes in the district's [original and usually minority] character and culture. In the once predominately black 11th Street neighborhood, Census figures now show that the community is 75 percent white, 7 percent black and 31 percent Latino.

## **East Austin's Past**

The real estate-fueled shift to the East Side was widely unexpected, according to Austin history. Like many cities in the South, Austin's past is riddled with racially influenced development and systematic oppression, according to the African American Quality of Life Final Report, a report commissioned by the City of Austin.

Following the Reconstruction period, freed Texan slaves and their families settled in various pockets around the then-small city. In 1928, an Austin City Council resolution created neighborhoods and communities that shape the city we know today. "A City Plan for Austin, Texas", essentially outlined the segregation and the socioeconomic and racial boundaries that would exist for the next 50 years.

Many blacks in Austin were systematically forced to uproot from their settlement communities and relocate to a city-mandated zip code. Through the plan, the City of Austin designated the newly settled locale the “negro district”. According to a report by University of Texas at Austin Professor Eric Tang, blacks were compelled to move to the “negro district” if they wanted any of the amenities the city could provide them with.

Tang says that if a black Austinite were to take advantage of any of the public services allotted to them by the government, they had to live within the “negro” district’s limits. According to Tang, city leaders used then-legal segregation to the fullest extent and coerced the migration of the city’s black populace without violating the U.S. Constitution.

That “negro district” thrived. With the establishment and construction of several black-owned business, churches and housing communities like the historic Rosewood Courts, East Austin bustled with city life. The city’s many other non-black residents, however, frequently ignored the area during its peak. That is —of course— until the property and land real estate brokers and firms realized its tremendous potential.

Within half a century, the former city-enforced ghetto that was the “negro district” had transformed to Austin’s newest neighborhood to covet.

## **Property Tensions**

Though the Franklins have benefitted from the real estate boom, many black homeowners run the risk of getting bamboozled out of maximum payouts.

“Because some minorities are not well versed in real estate, they are easily taken advantage of by savvy real estate agents,” said Joyce Williams, a local realtor.

The Franklins say they were faced with aggressive and frequent offers to sell to developers who wanted to build multi-family units, condos or apartments.

Zillow, a house listing website, recently listed a unit in a small Poquito Street townhome development leasing for \$1,392 per month.

Ben Franklin says he and his wife often came home to several phone calls and letters inquiring on the sale of their home. The Franklins also reflect the senior homeowner demographic of East Austin, making them a seemingly easy target for developers’ quick financial gain.

“Because most of the elderly minorities have an outdated concept of the dollar, getting \$100,000 plus for a property they paid \$12,000 for seems extraordinary to them,” Williams said. “Unless they seek out seller agents with their best interest at heart they will continue to be taken advantage of in this area.”

The Franklins are a lucky few longtime residents with the financial ability and the physical fortitude to take advantage of their valued property. Harvey Franklin says the couple’s patience was well calculated and worth their while.

“We knew buying in this area would eventually pay off,” Harvey Franklin said. “We knew this area would eventually change and we considered this home wealth building for our family.”

## **Profiting Through Ownership**

Not every black East Austin homeowner is ready or willing to sell. Some black families have inherited property, and plan to keep it the family for generations to come, as is the case for east side resident Bobbie January.

Bobbie January, 67, who has lived on Hargrave Street since 1960, says she intends on keeping her inherited properties in her family's ownership long after she is gone. At the time, East Austin was the only area blacks were permitted to live in. The original homeowner, January's mother, willed the home to January upon her death in 1991.

"This home was gifted to me from my mother," said January. "When I die, this home will be given to my children. It is never to be sold."

"I was given this home and I'm not letting it go," January said. "I want my family to have a piece of their history when I'm gone. I understand the potential value of this home but I'll never allow for it to sell."

Her property is assessed at \$222,380, according to the Travis Central Appraisal District. It could be listed for twice that figure.

Williams, who has been selling property in Austin for more than 20 years, says many black East Austin homeowners are subject to financial strains.

"I believe that the majority of minority homeowners in East Austin are living in the area simply due to inheriting property," Williams said.

And, she added, many of them are caught in a trap: “With all of the new development in the area, property taxes have increased astronomically for them. Thus, they find themselves in a financial bind attempting to prevent foreclosure.”

This financial bind is a tight one. Williams says minority homeowners constantly find themselves in a balancing act that their finances just cannot maintain.

“There are more homes belonging to older residents in East Austin that do not carry property insurance,” Williams said. “Oftentimes they can not afford to pay the taxes and insurance so they opt to try to prevent the foreclosure. Since most of them do not have a mortgage on their homes, this is possible. Additionally, the choice to attempt to keep the taxes paid results in little if any money to make needed repairs to their dwellings. Foregoing these repairs subjects them to code violations. It is a vicious cycle for them.”

January says she can keep up with her property taxes and insurance, but that she struggles with paying for renovations. Built in the mid 1930’s, the Hargrave Street home is sturdy but old. Austin’s Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit organization that builds, reconstructs and renovates homes will be starting a mini-overhaul of the house in the next few months. The project will be completely funded by Habitat.

Developers encouraging her to sell her property often approach January, but she says she has no intention of ever allowing the property to fall into commercial or even non-relative hands.

“I love this home,” January said. “My children and their children have grown up here, and they have a whole history in this house. It needs some renovations, but I



couldn't imagine ever letting it go. I'd rather my family have this property than to ever let anyone tear it down."

For resident Kevin Franklin (no relation to former Poquito Street homeowners Ben and Harvey Franklin) maintaining ownership of his Bunche Road home is more about the personal connection to the neighborhood than the financial payout. Franklin was raised in his grandparent's 1960's home, which they purchased for \$22,000 in 1968. Since his grandparents' passing, Franklin now owns and maintains the home as a rental property, making \$1000 a month. Today, the home is appraised at \$175,133, according to TCAD.

"The money is obviously a good bonus, but I kept the home because I wanted to keep it in the family," Franklin said.

Franklin says that he has considered selling, but the lack of control in the real estate process would ultimately do more harm than good.

"At this point, we wouldn't have any kind of control of who the buyer is," Kevin said. "This neighborhood is still considerably black, and I would like to maintain that community as much as possible. I don't agree with what gentrification is doing in this city and the whole premise behind it is money. If I were to sell this home, I would become part of the problem."

Franklin currently lives in the city's neighboring suburb of Round Rock. He says that his home on Bunche Road is a financial asset that he plans on utilizing for years to come.

“I’ve been thinking about moving back into the house lately,” Franklin said. “I would be in a neighborhood I feel comfortable in, my job would be a 10 minute drive away and I wouldn’t have to pay a mortgage. I miss the east side and I want to make sure to stay connected to it.”

Former Darlington Lane resident King says she still feels a connection to the neighborhood and visits regularly. She also says her family’s situation was unusual, as many other blacks in the neighborhood and in her own extended family weren’t able to cash out in the same way.

“I love the changes I see happening on the east side,” King said. “But I’m not happy about the fact that there are still so many of our people being kicked out of their homes that they’ve been in for years and years because of financial murkiness. My family’s church is still in that [Darlington Lane] area and I go there about once a month, but I don’t know of any other families or homeowners that were able to cash out like we did.”

Resident Freddie Dixon owns two properties, both land and structural, on the east side for a combined appraisal value of \$332,930, according to TCAD. Dixon says that although he has thought of selling, the trouble of going through the entire process doesn’t seem worth the time.

“I get letters weekly from people asking me to sell my house,” Dixon said. “But I’m not interested. I know the money I could stand to make, but at this point, where am I going to go if I leave this place?”

Dixon is the director at the Community Engagement Center where he leads partnerships and activities in conjunction with UT's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement to address issues related to the city's underserved communities. He says that the lack of black "co-oping", or the pooling of monies to invest in real estate developments, is the main root of the lack of black ownership and buying power both on 11th Street and in the community at large.

"We have seen an imbalance in entrepreneurship," Dixon said. "Many of the original landowners or business owners of the corridor have died off or their families relinquished their land long ago. Blacks in Austin are a really industrious and professional group, but it seems as though we do not have a good entrepreneurial class to get things going."

## **The Not-So-Invisible Black Dollar**

While many black owned businesses have disappeared over the last few decades, some of 11th Street's most popular tracts are still under black ownership.

"When it comes to people saying 'black people don't own anything on 11th Street,' — we almost own it all," said Gregory Smith, CEO and president of the Austin Revitalization Authority (ARA), which purchases and oversees land and property in the 11th Street District to ensure cultural preservation and economic benefits for every socioeconomic type of homeowner. "The black ownership is here and they are reaping

some of those benefits. It just may not be as outwardly obvious as many of the white owned business are on the corridor.”

Smith says this landownership should be a source of pride for Austin’s black populace, serving as testament to the community’s resilience. Community fixtures like Ebenezer Baptist Church and the Victory Grill are still black owned. And now, Smith says newer enterprises – like Hillside Farmacy and Urdy Plaza – are also on land long owned by black residents and organizations.

The ARA was created 20 years ago to both address the area’s gentrification and preserve the community’s important cultural centers and structures. Smith says the ARA also played a role in revitalizing the then rundown 11th Street neighborhood.

Smith says although not every black owned home or business has been preserved throughout the city’s gentrification boom, the ARA has played an integral part in facilitating the sale and purchase of the community’s property with regard to reasonable profits.

“We knew that gentrification was inevitable,” Smith said. “This organization made sure that property owners got fair and just treatments and prices for their land. For a lot of blacks in the early part of the East Austin housing market boom, this was the American Dream.”

Since its inception in 1995, the ARA has overseen the purchase, renovation and resale of homes on the east side. Legacy Estates, one of the organization’s most ambitious projects, manages the construction of new residences to add new market rate home ownership units to the community. In addition, the residential plan aims to provide

quality housing for people across all income levels. While the ARA does have the capacity to sell these properties for astronomical prices, Smith says the organization is committed to providing a percentage of the homes at affordable rates, allowing new residents to partake in the real estate boom and eventually profit.

“When we first started [in 1995], we were attracting a lot of minority businesses, giving them a spot in the community,” Smith said. “In the mid ‘90s, the ARA managed the construction of 40 homes in the immediate area. We made sure to sell to income-qualified families. At that time, the demographic breakdown was 1/3, 1/3 and 1/3 [black, white and Latino].”

According to Smith, homeowners who purchased ARA east side homes for approximately \$92,000 were given their own opportunity at striking it big with the future sale of their properties.

“These homeowners are realizing that now is the time to sell,” Smith said. “I think the original challenge and charge for ARA, which was to jumpstart the revitalization efforts have been done at this point.”

Ebenezer Baptist Church is an 11th Street staple and the largest single amount of black owned land in the corridor. The church’s main property consists of three main buildings and almost 1.5 acres (almost 2.5 city blocks), according to TCAD.

Van Johnson, project director for Ebenezer’s East Austin Economic Development Corporation (EAEDC), says the amount of land the church has acquired over the years was because of the former pastor’s keen economic foresight.

“Marvin Griffin was more than just a great Ebenezer Pastor, he was a visionary,” said Johnson. “He knew that we were sitting on valuable land and that securing church ownership would ensure future autonomy and growth.”

Johnson and the rest of the EAEDC organized in 1988 to begin planning for and pursuing the church’s expansion project. Funding for the project was collected through the congregation along with EAEDC, Chase Bank, the city of Austin and a Lilly Endowment, according to Johnson. The corporation completed construction on the Marvin C. Griffin Building, named after the church visionary, in 1997.

Today, Ebenezer’s property holdings value approximately \$2.5 million, according to TCAD.

“Ebenezer held its land, but we had a very passionate pastor,” Johnson said. “Pastor Griffin knew that eventually, the city would have to move east and he, along with others, took steps to ensure that Ebenezer not only survived the change, but thrived alongside the bigger developers.”

## **Neighborhood Newbies**

Newcomers to the east side can be met with just as much cultural shock and adjustment as longtime residents. But there are some new, white residents like David Scheinfeld who have embraced the area’s history and have begun working to preserve it while taking advantage of the profitability.

Scheinfeld moved to Austin in 2008 from his native Chicago. He says he was familiar with gentrification back home and didn't see the issue as being much of a deterrent from living on the east side. Scheinfeld and his girlfriend purchased a home at the corner of Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard and Airport Boulevard for \$275,000, where they stayed for five years.

"I love this neighborhood and the history that comes with it," Scheinfeld said. "This area has a neighborhood feel with an added urban environment. But I still saw a lot of families move out on our street, along with a lot of companies. I got on a neighborhood committee to start cleaning up the area and it's made a difference."

Scheinfeld found his first Austin home in the then crime-ridden McKinley Heights neighborhood, but he didn't plan on staying at the three-bedroom-two-bath property for long. The home was built in 1950, and like many houses in the area, renovations and remodeling were necessary, according to Scheinfeld. Both the neighborhood and the potential economic payout played major roles in Scheinfeld's move.

"At the time, we thought we were paying a lot for our home, but the listing price wasn't out of the realm of our affordability," Scheinfeld said. "We fixed the house up and ended up being able to fully utilize it as an additional source of income."

Now living in a new home at the intersection of 9th Street and Waller Street, Scheinfeld says their old home (which they still own) in McKinley heights serves as a "purely economic rental property". The couple profits \$2,000 a month from the

McKinley Heights home, which is enough to almost fully cover their mortgage, according to Scheinfeld.

He says the financial gains have far outweighed the neighborhood's problems, but the cultural issues are still present. Scheinfeld and his girlfriend make an effort to get involved in the community and establish a rapport with their longtime neighbors. Recently, Scheinfeld has joined a neighborhood committee filing for historical landmark accreditation, but he says there's no ignoring the lightening of the area.

"I love this area because of the neighborhood vibe and diversity, but we mainly moved here for the financial investment," Scheinfeld said. "We're definitely losing some of the culture, and the economic issue is a major driving force behind that. There's always going to be a give and take in these situations, but I think it's always important to remember the history behind the area and to balance out the economic climate so that we're not pushing people out who don't want to leave. This is and should be their home as much as it is mine."

## **Gentrification and its Perks**

The gentrification situation in Austin has many components, and not all of them are negative in nature or detrimental to the east side's future as a community. Pete Saunders, who has studied gentrification for years in his role as the executive director for a regional planning commission in Illinois, says gentrification can bring great benefits.



“Gentrification brings opportunities and amenities that the areas may not have had before,” Saunders said. “It opens up a whole new line of networking, as well. Interaction with a larger amount of people is possible and there’s a big opportunity for progress.”

The most obvious benefit of gentrification according to Saunders is the catalyst it creates for profitability. Increased property value is often a perk that the gentrified area has never experienced before, and allows for new avenues to gain capital.

“There’s a realization of an increased demand that has never been there before,” Saunders said. “This can be a powerful tool for the longtime residents of a gentrified area.”

Still, while gentrification can bring many economic and infrastructural accommodations, there is the constant threat of tension related to uprooting a community that has been associated with a certain geographical area for such a long time. It seems almost inevitable that when new city transplants move into a neighborhood that has been established for a specific community, there will be a significant clash. In Austin’s case, the small black population is a vulnerable one. And a gentrified East Austin proves difficult to ever truly reclaim.

According to Dr. Tang’s report, Austin is a statistical outlier. Tang says it is the only major city in America to experience a double-digit rate of general population growth while simultaneously experiencing a drastic decline in the black population.

Unlike its fellow metropolitan Texas cities Dallas and Houston, Austin’s black population never represented more than 14 percent of the city’s population – a figure it reached in the 1980’s, according to the Census. Though he is not an Austinite, Saunders

has studied Austin's gentrification issues and has found telling comparisons and contrast to his native Chicago. He says the vast outmigration of blacks in East Austin was even more of a handicap for the demographic.

"I find the move of so many blacks out of Austin a little bit concerning," Saunders said. "Blacks are moving away from future opportunity that they don't foresee."

While the migration of blacks to neighboring suburbs of the city limits, Saunders still believes the future of East Austin is promising one, regardless of the specific number of blacks that will live there.

"Communities are successful when there's a lot of vitality, when they're dynamic and when they change" Saunders said. "Gentrification helps fuel the vitality of a community. Anything that helps that community regain and obtain that dynamism is—at its core—a good thing."

## **A Mixed Blessing**

Black Austinites are a shrinking demographic and many have been victimized by the rampant gentrification of East Austin. But some locals have managed to strike it big in the real estate boom, profiting as much as or more than their white counterparts. This phenomenon has become a mixed blessing for some locals; the opportunity for making a substantial profit off black owned East Austin property comes with its own cultural price. Former Darlington Lane resident King says the opportunity to sell her family's east side

home brought hefty financial benefits – but not without cultural displacement and heartache.

“Having left the east side is bittersweet,” King said. “I’m glad my mother was able to sell her home for a price she deserved and the money made was helpful for me and my siblings. But I still hurt for all of the people that couldn’t do what we did.”

King says the gentrification is inevitable, but she remains hopeful for other blacks who may be considering cashing in.

“These were our homes first,” King said. “If we eventually have to give them up, the least we should be able to do is leave them on our own accord and with our own financial gain in mind. We deserve a piece of the pie and I see nothing wrong with us getting just that.”

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## **Vita**

Lillian Paige Turner was born in Austin, Texas. After completing her work at John B. Connally High School, she attended the University of Central Arkansas to pursue a degree in Mass Communication. During her time at UCA, she competed as an NCAA Track and Field Athlete. She graduated from UCA in May 2013 and began her graduate degree education at the University of Texas at Austin the following fall. Lillian Paige Turner is a proud member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc, Her work has been published by CultureMap Austin, TRIBEZA and 501 LIFE Magazine. She currently lives in Austin, Texas with her dog Bubba.

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This report was typed by the author.